Tales for October

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Mud Hollow Bridge

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Waiting for the Flood

Oscar Alexi sat at his small kitchen table eating fried eggs and toast. A morning breeze off the lake blew through the kitchen windows ruffling the sheer, lime green curtains on either side. He sipped coffee while listening to the television news from the other room.

When finished with his breakfast, he reached for his pill box and opened the compartment marked 'Wednesday'. He dumped the pills into his hand and swallowed them down with a few ounces of orange juice. Running his fingers through his thin white hair, he stood up, belching.

He carried his dishes to the sink, and washed them as the television droned on in the background. With the dishes dripping dry in the rack, he made his way to the living room. He stood before the television for a minute, listening to the anchorwoman of a morning show talk about fashion. He shook his head and shut her off. Then he walked out the front door, the screen slamming behind him, and began his daily walk along the lakeshore.

It was a clear morning. A cool breeze lilted across the river rock and lime stone shoreline of Lake Winnebago. As he passed by, Oscar noted the condition of his neighbors' piers stretching out into the water. He would also note the condition of his neighbors' cottages and yards. Oscar did not look after his neighbors' property per some intrusiveness, but rather per a sense of neighborly responsibility.

Most of his neighbors came to their cottages only for weekends in the summer, and for summer vacation. Cottages were usually abandoned on weekdays. So, Oscar took it upon himself to keep an eye on things while folks were gone. There were only a handful of people, like Oscar, who resided by the lake year round.

About five cottages down, he saw John and Judy Schoene preparing their boat for a morning of fishing. Oscar had known them for three years now. They began living year round at the lake last year after they retired. Most mornings they would be out on their boat and fish till about noon.

Oscar walked up the wooden pier to where John and Judy were launching. "So, you gonna go catch my lunch?"

John grinned. "Let's hope so. We got skunked yesterday. Not even a sheepshead."

"Well, you'll get 'em today. Bring back a walleye or a perch for me."

"Would you like to come with us Oscar?" Judy asked.

"No thanks. I don't go out on the water any more. My fishing days are over. I haven't been in a boat since the accident." An uneasy silence ensued. Oscar smiled as his eyes caught Judy's. "I plan to die by the lake, not in it."

John cleared his throat. "Well, if you ever change your mind and want to come out with us sometime, you're always welcome."

"Well, I do appreciate it, but…."

"Oh my God! Look!" Judy interrupted pointing to the sky behindOscar. He turned looking skyward. An enormous white and orange ball of fire leaving a black smoke trail behind it ripped through the clear blue Wisconsin morning.

"It's huge!" John said in disbelief.

The three of them watched it fall over the horizon, out of sight.

"Christ. How big do you think that was?" John asked.

"I don't know." Oscar replied. "In my seventy-eight years, I've never seen one that big."

"It must have hit the ground somewhere. I hope no one got hurt." Judy said.

"I think I'll go turn on the news. I'll see you guys later." Oscar started down the pier. He felt a little dizzy when he got to the shore. The fear of having another stroke flashed through him. He stopped to collect himself and quickly realized the ground was shaking. The shaking grew more intense. Oscar staggered forward as the earth lurched beneath him. He lost his balance, falling in John and Judy's front yard. He laid prone covering his head as the quaking grew to crescendo. The noise was deafening. Finally it stopped, almost as quickly as it began.

Oscar slowly rolled over and sat up. A large oak tree leaned over him. It was still rooted to the ground which had pushed up from beneath it. He looked out at the lake. A wall of rock and rubble had pushed up along the shoreline. Oscar estimated the height of the wall varied from five to ten feet and stretched along the shoreline as far as he could see.

With a grunt he wrestled himself to his feet and set out to see if John and Judy were okay. After a couple of steps he saw John's head peek up from behind the limestone wall.

"Oscar!" John yelled. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay! How are you guys?"

"A little shaken, but we're not hurt."

John climbed over the top of the wall. Judy followed. They met Oscar in front of their cottage. The north wall had collapsed.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" John exclaimed. "God damn it! What the hell is going on around here? We're in Wisconsin for Christ's sake! We don't have earthquakes!"

Judy gasped at the site of their crumbling cottage and began to weep.

"Actually we get them all of the time." Oscar stated. "The Niagra fault line runs right along this side of the lake. We always have earthquakes, we just never feel them."

"Yeah, well we felt this one."

"Do you think the falling star caused it?" Judy sniffed.

"I don't know." Oscar replied. Then an alarming thought crossed his mind. "Do you guys have gas for your stove or anything?"

John took a deep breath. "No, we only have electric."

"Okay, I'm going to go check my cottage. I'll come back in a bit. We should probably check on the neighbors' cottages for gas leaks and water leaking. We don't need to be dealing with a fire, or septic tanks backing up."

John nodded slowly, staring at his broken cottage. "Okay. That's a good thought."

"We should probably check on 'Milwaukee Bob' too." Judy suggested.

Oscar felt increasing unease about his cottage and began walking home. "I'll be back in a bit."

Oscar cautiously made his way back to his cottage noting the change in terrain. The rock wall continued to stretch along with no apparent end in sight. A couple of trees were down, but fell harmlessly to the ground.

The cottages between Oscar's and the Shoene's did not seem to be damaged. Oscar prayed his cottage still stood. It was all he had. He has been alone since his wife died. Grounded optimism grew in him as he got closer. Oscar was finally able to breath a sigh of relief when he saw his house still standing and evidently undamaged.

He walked through the screen door into the living room to find furniture tossed around. The china hutch had tipped, landing face first. The television had also fallen on its screen. Broken glass covered the floor around it.

Oscar found the kitchen in better order. The dishes he left to dry in the rack dumped to the floor. He pushed the debris out of the way with his foot. Little else seemed damaged. Oscar crossed through the small kitchen sniffing for gas. Confident there was no leak; he turned a dial on the front of the stove. He half smiled as the starter clicked three times before blue and yellow flames sprayed out from the burner. He turned it off and side-stepped to the sink. His hands simultaneously turned the hot and cold, but no water came through the faucet. Reaching over to the side of the window, he flipped the switch to the light over the sink. He sighed learning he had lost electric. He crossed the room to the phone. He lifted the receiver from the cradle and put it to his ear. There was no dial tone.

Without warning the ground began to shake again. Oscar grabbed on to the edge of the counter. The low rumbling lasted only a few seconds. "Just an aftershock," he reminded himself out loud, wondering how many more were to come.

Oscar bent down, reaching into the cabinet beneath the sink and fished out a flashlight. He stood and slowly looked around the kitchen, then left to meet John and Judy.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the water bubbling out from the top of the limestone rubble piled upon the beach before his cottage. The water bubbled and serenely splashed down the rocks. Oscar stood silently smiling at his new fountain. It was beautiful. Curiosity, however, overpowered him and he found himself carefully climbing the limestone to more closely investigate his new fountain.

Water gently splashed him as he reached the summit. Oscar reached out and collected a palm full cool, clear water as it bubbled out from cracks in the rock. Holding the water before his face, he could smell a hint of rotten eggs. He knew then his well water was leaking up

through the rocks. There was sulfur in his well giving the water that particular odor. Disappointed and satisfied to learn what had become of his water, Oscar descended the rubble and continued to John and Judy's.

The other cottages appeared structurally sound between his cottage and the Schoene's. However, starting at their cottage and proceeding north along the shore, they found cottages were more damaged, most of them severely.

Oscar did not see John and Judy when he returned to their front yard. He walked around to the back finding them standing in the gravel driveway talking.

"Hey O," John asked, "how did you make out?"

"I lost my water and electric, but the cottage held together. I got lucky. How bad is the damage to your place?"

"It's a total loss." Judy's voice quivered, eyes watering.

"It's not safe. I think it could collapse at any minute." John added.

"You can stay with me if you like. I have a spare bedroom."

"Thanks Oscar."

A sky blue Bonneville approached, stirring up the gravel road leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. The car pulled into the driveway abruptly stopping before the three neighbors. 'Milwaukee' Bob got out from the driver's side. His t-shirt and blue jeans were speckled with blood. He scratched his black bearded chin and gave a discreet wave as he walked over to them.

"Are you okay Bob?" Judy asked.

"Yeah, I'm all right. How's by youse guys?"

"We're okay."

"What happened Bob?" Oscar asked pointing to the blood stains on Bob's shirt.

A sour expression crossed 'Milwaukee' Bob's face. He pursed his lips. In a quivering voice he stated, "'Crazy' George didn't make it."

"What?" John exclaimed.

'Milwaukee' Bob took a deep breath and swallowed. "His cottage collapsed on him. It took me about an hour to dig him out."

"Where is he?" Oscar asked.

'Milwaukee' Bob motioned for them to follow. He led the three to the back of the car and opened the trunk revealing George's crushed and twisted body. Oscar felt his stomach knot as he looked at 'Crazy' George's face. Ghastly pale. Polk-a-dotted with blood. Cold blank stare. Purple lips. Mouth open. Judy covered her mouth with her hands, issuing a short shriek.

"Jesus Christ, Bob!" John exclaimed with twisted face, turning away from the car. "You can't just carry the poor bastard around in your trunk like that."

"What the hell was I supposed to do? I can't carry a dead guy in the front or back seat. I mean, I love the guy and all, but I just couldn't."

"Oh my God!" Judy screamed. "Look at his hand! He's moving!"

The three men stepped closer to the trunk to see 'Crazy' George's right index and middle fingers twitching.

"It's probably some nerve that didn't realize it was dead yet." Oscar suggested.

"Maybe rigor mortis is causing the muscles to contract." 'Milwaukee' Bob offered.

"I don't know," said John. "This just doesn't seem right."

'Crazy' George blinked his eyes.

"Jesus Christ! George! George, can you hear me?" 'Milwaukee' Bob exclaimed.

George rolled his head a bit. A guttural low moan emanated from him, quickly growing louder and louder into a shriek. 'Milwaukee' Bob slammed the trunk shut. Taking short quick breaths he turned to the others. They stared back at him, bewildered. They stood motionless as they heard 'Crazy' George writhing in the trunk, pounding the inside.

"I've got to get him to the hospital." 'Milwaukee' Bob said pulling the car keys from his front pants pocket.

The others stepped back as Bob accelerated, spitting up gravel and dust behind him. The three neighbors watched quietly as their friend quickly sped over the hill out of sight.

Silence followed for a few moments until Oscar finally interrupted. "Perhaps we should tend to the business at hand and make sure the area is safe."

A couple of hours later Oscar John and Judy were gathered in Oscar's kitchen. The three of them wedged in around the tiny table eating sandwiches and drinking beer. They ate silently listening to news reports from the battery powered radio.

They learned large meteors had crashed to the earth around the globe. Earthquakes consequently erupted worldwide. Many cities have been damaged. There had been a tremendous loss of life. This was a disaster unlike any before.

Having finished eating and grown weary of listening to the reports of chaos and carnage, Oscar interrupted the radio. "I just remembered something I wanted to show you guys." He motioned for John and Judy to follow. Oscar led them outside to the spring cascading down the rock wall.

"Oh, it's beautiful." Said Judy as a smile stretched across her face.

"Where is the water coming from?" John asked as he began climbing up the side of the rubble.

"That's my well water."

"That's too bad," Judy commiserated, "but at least it's pretty."

Oscar smiled and shook his head.

John reached the top, took a handful of water and wiped his face. He looked out over the lake noticing it had receded. There was ten to fifteen feet of exposed lake bed. "Hey you guys! Come up here! You have to see this!"

"What is it?" Judy asked.

"The lake is shrinking."

Judy and Oscar climbed up the side of the rubble wall as quickly as they could. Upon it's crest they looked out over the expanding rock and mud lake bed as the waters slowly retreated. Oscar could feel his heart pounding in his throat. He had lived his entire life by this lake. The lake had been an unfailing part of his life. And, even though five years ago his wife came to rest on the bottom, he still loved the lake. As did his wife. There was no better resting ground. At least that was what she told him. His eyes began to water as he watched a friend of seventy-eight years slowly slipping away.

"Where the hell is the water going?" John wondered aloud.

"I don't know." Oscar choked. "It just had to be a result of the earthquake."

Oscar retreated down the side of the rubble to his grassy yard. He began weeping before he could reach the cottage door.

Wiping his eyes, he made his way to the kitchen. He retrieved a beer from the refrigerator, cracked it open, and sat at the table. After a couple of swallows of warming beer, Oscar found the silence of his cottage unbearable and decided he would rather listen to the carnage reports on the radio.

"…reports of Lake Michigan water levels dropping rapidly have been confirmed by officials both in Wisconsin and Michigan. Now we are also getting reports of flooding taking place in northeastern Wisconsin into the U.P. Although nothing has been confirmed at this time, an official, under the condition of anonymity, has speculated that the earthquakes have actually created a giant sinkhole, for lack of a better term, allowing Lake Michigan to drain into northeastern Wisconsin as well as western portions of the Michigan Upper Peninsula. Evacuation efforts have begun in flooding areas. Unfortunately though, emergency crews are stretched thin as there has been so much damage from these disasters. At this time there is no way of predicting where or how much flooding will take place. This is Chester Marcol reporting for Wisconsin Public Radio."

"You are listening to WFDL 94.3 fm. Coming up in just a few minutes we have an interview with Marv Leitner, a professor of theology at St. Mary's College. Are we in the revelation? Are the dead indeed rising from the grave? He will share some theological perspectives with us as to why these events might be taking place. But first…."

Oscar jumped at the sound of the screen door slamming. John and Judy filed into the kitchen.

Oscar shook his head. A tear rolled down his cheek. Fear, uncertainty, and confusion were taking hold. The fact was the certain future of yesterday was now gone, replaced by disaster and the unknown. He wished his wife were still with him. She always had strength and hope. Always certain and smiling, even while cancer was eating her up. Oscar sighed and swallowed, choking back a wave of tears swelling within him. "Lake Michigan is Flooding into northern Wisconsin and the U.P."

"No." John gasped.

"I'm afraid so." Oscar tipped his head back taking a deep swallow of beer.

"My God." Judy said. "What are they going to do?"

"They're trying to evacuate people as best they can. But I'm afraid its going to be bad." Oscar replied.

"Jesus Christ, what next?" John asked as he cracked open a beer.

"Don't ask." Oscar sighed. "Don't ask."

Oscar woke up. Eyes blinking, he yawned. Then, with a groan he pushed himself up, sitting on the edge of the bed. He looked at his watch – 4:32 pm. He had napped for half-an-hour still he felt tired and unrested.

Walking stiffly to the kitchen, he ran his fingers through his thin white hair. He found the radio still on, but neither John nor Judy was there. Oscar pulled up a chair at the table. He was only half listening to the radio as he wondered what to have for supper. Then the radio grabbed his attention.

"…and indeed, everywhere."

"Doctor Pregger, there have been rumored reports of people who have recently died during these events have actually been coming back to life. Is there any truth to this? Or, have you seen any of this firsthand?"

"I have not seen anything of that sort myself and I really cannot comment on it at this time…."

Oscar thought of 'Milwaukee' Bob and 'Crazy' George. He wondered how they were. A picture of Bob driving frantically with George and his sickly white, blood splattered face writhing about in the trunk flashed through Oscar's mind. The sound of the screen door slamming shut erased that gruesome thought.

Judy walked into the kitchen with a bagful of groceries. "Hey Oscar," she set the bag on the counter. "I'll get supper started in a jiff."

"You read my mind." Oscar stood up. "Do you need help with anything?"

"No. I've got it." Judy began pulling contents from the bag and organizing them on the counter. "John said the lake is nearly empty. He said he could only see a little water over toward the northwest side. I guess you can see a few cars and shanties and snowmobiles that have gone through the ice during the winters."

Oscar quietly wondered how many bodies were at rest in the weeds and the mud of the lake's floor. Every year there were a couple of accidents and the lake would get dredged a few times. And every year it seems at least one body is never found. His wife, Ruth, fell victim to the lake. Oscar would never forget that day. It happened on September 24, 1994. They were out fishing. A storm was rolling in. The wind picked up. The waves grew to white caps and began pitching the boat. Ruth was sitting in the bow, her hands grasping the gunwale. Oscar had his back to her as he pulled the cord to start the outboard motor. After three or four pulls it started. He turned to the front of the boat to find Ruth gone. Frantically he searched for her, the bow of the boat plowing through waves. He drove the boat in ever widening circles but he was not able to find her. Finally he conceded to the danger of his situation. He got home as quickly as he could and notified the authorities.

Police and rescue crews searched for her, but did not find her until the next day. There was a noticeable wound on the back of her head. Oscar became a 'person of interest' as the police repeatedly interviewed him while they investigated possible foul play. In the end, however, they concluded the wound came from striking the side of the boat as she fell overboard.

There was no evidence tying Oscar to his wife's death. It was officially an accident. Still, there were some who wondered about Oscar and what happened that day, especially a few who knew her cancer was terminal.

Oscar always hoped she had been knocked unconscious when she went overboard. It terrified and saddened him to think of her being conscious as she slipped beneath the waves, holding her breath, until finally gasping in cold water. And now the alleged stories of the dead rising made him relieved he had her remains cremated. That is no life after death, Oscar thought, wandering the earth on an unending quest for feeding a fathomless hunger.

John walked into the kitchen. "How are we doing?"

"Okay I think." Judy replied.

"Do you need help with anything, Hon?"

"No. I'm okay."

"Walleye tonight, Oscar." John announced while pulling up a chair. "The last I had in the freezer. And from the looks of the lake, the last, period.

Oscar turned his attention back to the radio.

"… and the idea that the meteors causing the earthquakes were actually launched by aliens who are interested in conquering the earth?"

"Yes, based on the events happening, I believe the earth is under attack from an alien race. If you look at the series of events the evidence is quite strong. First, there had been a dramatic increase in the number of reported crop circles from around the world in recent weeks. Second, the fact the earth was hit with meteors in strategic places, along fault

lines causing earthquakes, suggests intent. One meteor striking a fault line I could understand. But with dozens having struck simultaneously around the world stands to reason this was a deliberate attack. Third, reports of the dead coming back to life indicates the invading force has the power of re-animating the dead in a way they are able to control them. Why put your own people at risk when you could have an army of undead doing your dirty work for you?"

"Oh, come on now, Doctor Burke. I have not heard of one confirmed UFO sighting since this began. Do you really expect our listeners to believe that aliens are bringing the dead back to life?"

"Now, you have to remember I never believed in this stuff before. However, I found things like this to be true when I was covering that last coupe in Haiti. I saw undead armies roaming through villages, killing and feeding on anyone they could lay their rotting hands on. They were brought back to life by voodoo priests and…."

Oscar shut off the radio. "Can you believe this…" He shook a finger at the radio. "This crap?"

"I don't know." John swallowed. "I just remember seeing 'Crazy' George in the back of Bob's trunk. That scared the fire out of me."

Oscar stood up and started for the refrigerator. "I've always considered myself a practical sort. I'm not one to ignore different ideas, but I really think this whole UFO thing is nonsense." He opened the refrigerator door and took out three heavily sweating cans of beer. He set one on the counter by Judy, handed another to John and returned to his chair while opening the can in his hands. "Besides, this is all speculation. I would like to hear some real news. How is the flooding? What's going on in cities? That sort of thing."

"Yeah." Judy started as she began pan frying the fish. "I'm sure we'll find out. If they're not reporting anything then there is probably nothing to report." She smiled to Oscar over her shoulder. "No news is good news, right?"

"That may be. But I'll believe the theologist who was on earlier that said we are in the Revelation before I'll believe the UFO stories."

The three remained silent in the kitchen. Sipping warm beer until supper was ready. After they finished eating they decided to collect containers and retrieve water from the spring.

John climbed to the top and began filling the containers. With a full container in each hand he turned to back down the rubble wall. As he went he looked out over the lake bed. He could see the lights of Oshkosh and Appleton faintly twinkling in the hot pink dusk. Several dark clouds plumed from the cities, rising high into the oncoming night. A chill danced up his spine and the skin on his back and arms turned to goose pimples as he noticed the water appeared to be slowly returning. John scampered down the side of the rubble spilling water on himself. He landed recklessly, nearly falling into the outreached arms of Oscar and Judy.

"What's wrong?" Judy asked.

"It looks like the lake is refilling."

Alarms went off in Oscar's head. A crazy itch shot through his stomach. "Oh, shit." He said slowly as a realization took hold. "That must be Lake Michigan."

"How much of the lake refilled?" Judy asked John. "Do you think it will reach us here?"

"We'll find out." John replied as he started back inside to boil water.

Oscar entered the living room with a candle in one hand and a six pack of warm beer in the other. John and Judy sat on the couch. The radio was on, detailing the events of the day from around the state, country and world. Candles which Oscar usually reserved for autumn and winter were scattered throughout the living room. The soft light gave the room a warm glow with scents of cinnamon, apple and vanilla. Oscar handed each of them a beer and took a seat on the chair next to the couch.

"They say the water continues to rise." John said softly.

Oscar responded by opening a beer and gulping a mouthful.

"I think we should leave in the morning." John paused for Oscar's response, but Oscar remained stone faced and silent. John continued. "Judy and I have been talking and we think it would be best if we all went to town. It's on higher ground. It should be safer."

Oscar stared off. His face was gaunt and tired. He nodded slowly at John's words. "You two leave if you want. I understand, but I'm going to stay."

"Oh, come on now, Oscar." Judy said firmly. "The place will be flooded tomorrow night. Come to town with us. You'll be safe."

"Now look," Oscar turned to them speaking deliberately. "I have lived my entire life here. I was born here, and I plan to die here." Oscar sipped his beer and relaxed in his chair.

"I thought you said you 'plan to die by the lake and not in it.'" John reminded him.

Silence reigned for a few moments before Oscar replied. "I guess if you have to go there is no better way to die than in the embrace of an old friend." Oscar looked over to them. "Besides, we don't know that the water will reach us."

"Suit yourself." John replied. "But you know you're welcome with us if you change your mind."

Judy shook her head slowly, with a scowl on her face. She thought Oscar was being foolish. And she couldn't believe her husband would give up so easily on trying to convince Oscar to come along. She opened her mouth to let them both know what she thought, but held her tongue at the last moment, realizing she had to respect Oscar's decision. It was one only he could make for himself.

Oscar woke up. He looked at his watch – 7:02 am. He could hear John and Judy moving about in the kitchen. After a yawn and a stretch he heaved himself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Then he got up, got dressed and went to the kitchen to find Judy boiling water. "Good morning Oscar." She greeted.

"Good morning."

"I found some instant coffee. Would you like some?"

"That would be nice. Thank you."

"The water will be ready in a minute."

Oscar sat at the table. Leaning forward, he grabbed his plastic pill box. He held it in his hands for a minute silently looking at it. Then, without opening the lid marked 'Thursday' he put the box back.

John entered the room. "Good morning Oscar."

"Good morning."

"We're all set to go." John said as he pulled up a chair next to Oscar. "Of course, it's not like we have much of anything to pack anymore."

"Never mind, we'll get a lot of that stuff back." Judy said as she set cups of coffee before Oscar and John. "The most important thing is that none of us were hurt. We're all lucky not to have wound up like 'Crazy' George."

The two men silently nodded in agreement. Silence continued to dominate the room as the three drank their coffee. Finally, when finished, John stood up. "Shall we get going Judy?"

"Yes, of course." She took a last sip.

Oscar stood up. "I'll see you out."

"It's okay. You don't have to." John said. "I want to thank you for everything Oscar. When we get to town we'll let the authorities know you're here."

"And we'll come check on you as soon as we can." Judy added. She hugged Oscar. "Take care. And thanks for letting us stay with you."

"My pleasure," Oscar replied. "Have a safe trip."

With that said, John and Judy walked out the back door. Oscar sat at his kitchen table in silence. He heard the car start, then the popping of the gravel, the ping in the wheel wells, as the car rolled out of his drive.

After a few minutes Oscar stood up. He figured he had better collect some more water and begin boiling it now, so he would have clean water later when he wanted it. After grabbing the water containers he walked out the front screen door letting it smack shut behind him.

Oscar made his way to the rubble wall and began climbing. With a groan he pulled himself to the precipice and stood looking out over the lake. The water was to the foot of the rubble wall. There was no way to tell if the water was still rising. He made a mental note of the waters height, then turned his attention to the spring. After filling the

containers, Oscar carefully descended the wall. He began back to the cottage when suddenly he felt dizzy again.

"Oh God, not another earthquake!" He pleaded. Then a sharp stabbing pain struck through the back of his head. Oscar winced, dropping the water, grabbing the back of his head. He fell forward, unconscious before he hit the ground.

Oscar woke to find himself in darkness. Not dark of night, but abysmal pitch black. He was numb, cold and unable to move. There were no lights, no stars, no sound. Hours seemed to pass as he lay there trying to yell for help. Finally he saw a light above him. It was a tiny light, like a firefly glowing constantly above him. Oscar watched as the light appeared to be growing. Larger and larger the light grew. Oscar could not tell if the light was growing or descending upon him. Aching pain began to creep through his body. As the light grew more brilliant the pain became more intense. The light continued to grow brighter and larger until it completely enveloped Oscar. As the brilliant white light began to blind him, the pain became excruciating. He lay writhing in pain as the light enveloped him even more intensely. His body racked in agony, he arched his back. His lips slid wide exposing his gnashed teeth as if tetanus gripped him. The light drove through him making the pain even more intense. Still he held silent during his rebirth until finally he could take no more. A guttural moan belched from his gut rising to a banshee shriek.

Oscar opened his eyes and sat up. He was cold as the ground he was lying on. He looked around. His right pupil was blown. By the position of the sun he could tell it was mid-afternoon. Water was trickling over the top of the rubble wall as the lake continued to rise. Slowly pushing himself to his feet he began a limping gait. The overwhelming, seemingly insatiable desire to chew raw flesh beckoned him in the direction of town. There, he knew he would join others like him, where they would descend upon the town with the night and frantically feed upon the living.

The House of Niebuhr

What?... A body?... In that house?... Well, not exactly. There are no bodies in the house. At least not the kind you are expecting. I'll explain later. Come, let us get to the tavern, the fog is turning to rain.

I love these chilly, foggy nights of autumn. We do not have the fog often and I enjoy it when it is here. I love how the street lights streak through the ebb and flow of the night fog and the air is filled with the smell of fallen leaves. It brings to mind scenes written by Shakespeare or Doyle.

Here we are. Let me get the door for you. No, please, I insist. Very well then, thank you.

Let us take a booth by the window. Oh, yes I agree, however I would much rather sit off to the side where we can gaze at the beautiful fog.

I would love one. Thank you. I'm afraid I will need a light as well…. The waitress did not seem to notice us. I will just get our drinks from the bar. What would you like? That sounds good. I will have a Manhattan as well. No, no. You may buy the next round if you like.

Here you are. What? Oh, of course. I am sorry my friend. I know I promised to tell you about the house, but I do get distracted with my environment, the fog and the like. I love to observe the pleasurable surroundings about me. No really, look about this smoke filled rumbling room. Observe the characters mulling about the brick and wood in bar light. So many stories here. More than you or I could hope to tell together. For example, the scar on the bartender's chin…. Yes, I agree. He is a handsome fellow, nor does he look like the brawling type. However, you never know. And until you ask or challenge, you might indulge yourself in creating whatever story you want as to how he acquired the scar. And some of the scars left by events can be quite deep my friend. Sometimes the scar may not be visible, but is there none the less. Sometimes the scar of a story is left as a nervous tick, or inappropriate laughter. Sometimes the laughter may be appropriate, but not understood by others. Other times the scar is merely a shadow. The point being, perception, my friend, is as individual and fleeting as anything we could imagine, and yet so influential as to how we feel about things. Also, for reasons unknown to us, we are allowed to perceive some things in certain places more easily than others. Furthermore, we tend to disregard those perceptions that lack tangible evidence as figments of the imagination. We tend to explain them away with logic and scientific method, so long as the method does not expose what we really fear.

Regardless what we choose to perceive, scars from many different stories exist around us every day. Some places tend to collect more scars than others, for what ever reason. And sometimes for unknown

reasons we perceive the unseen scars. Ill natured things that travel amongst the shadows. Such scars that house bears.

That house has been standing in town since before the streets were laid. It is a place of history and antiquity. The founder of the town built that home himself. Of course, additions were made over the last two hundred and fifty years. I am certain there was some remodeling after the original family left the house. But, I digress….

You see, there are no bodies in the house. Some may see one on occasion. But, whatever they see does not belong to our plane of existence. I know this to be true. I am not one to believe in ghosts. However, I do believe some places are scarred with scenes of powerful events of the past. I have been in the house myself my friend. I have heard the stairs creek under my feet as I ascend them, and stop only to hear a second set of feet following me. I know of the strange tones and noises that emanate from vacant rooms. Screams, maniacal laughter, babies crying, coughing, all unearthly in nature I swear. I also found it quite disturbing to be in a room, perfectly fine, when suddenly a cold overbearing presence is felt. This perception is the unseen scar I speak of. And that house bears many such scars my friend.

That house had been abandoned for many years. I first learned of it a few years ago, shortly after I moved to town. One day a friend of mine at work mentioned the old Niebuhr house and its hauntings. I was skeptically curious, over lunch I inquired further about the history of the house. Through him I learned an unscrupulous businessman, by the name of Jonathan Niebuhr, gained possession of the house from widow Lancaster. The house was ill-gotten and left the old lady homeless. The widow tried to fight for her property and legal proceedings followed. But, Jonathan Niebuhr's shady business won out in the end.

Widow Lancaster was quite distraught, as she had always planned to spend her last days in the house. What is more, she had nowhere else to go. So, before she was evicted, she poisoned herself. And there were witnesses who said she cursed the house with her last breaths. Jonathan Niebuhr disregarded the stories of her curse. After all, she was not known to be a witch of any kind, nor was she any sort of gypsy. So he moved into the house shortly there after.

Mr. Niebuhr was in the house for about a month when he was taken ill by consumption. His coughing fits were horrific. He would cough up a bucket of blood a day. He died in the house after having been there two months. His family and friends that were with him the eve he died said he begged them to "Get that woman in the red dress out of my room!" But none of the women present were wearing red. Even though Niebuhr was dead, the curse lived on.

The estate went for auction, but no one dared bid on the house for fear of the rumored curse. The house stayed vacant for a few years before it was purchased by a young couple with a new born child. The couple was new to the area and unaware of the wretched history. The

agent selling the house gave the couple a splendid deal as he was in fear of keeping the property too long.

The young couple seemed comfortable in their new house. They were quite happy until the third month of their residence. That was when they found their child dead in his crib. There was no evidence of abuse or neglect. The couple did report to the Inspector that they had seen a woman in a red dress wandering about the property earlier that evening. The inspector insisted that there was no sign of foul play. The child had simply, mysteriously died. The couple was so upset they placed the house for sale and left.

Again the house stood vacant, this time for many years. No one wanted to any part of it since the curse was re-affirmed with the death of a child. Finally, one day an investor bought the house and planned to turn it into apartments to rent. Though he himself never lived there, he spent many hours of many days toiling away in the forsaken building.

He was near completion and began to run ads for leasing the units. That was when he went stark raving mad. His violent rantings of a woman in a red dress were nearly uncontrollable. He claimed she was trying to control him. Most certainly, everyone thought he was suffering from delusional paranoia. The poor man had to be locked up in a padded cell at the state facility. And though folks tried to find an excuse for his sudden departure from sanity, they could conclude nothing and assumed it was again the work of the curse.

Several years later his power of attorney was able to sell the house to a company that finished the remodeling and rehabbing. When completed they opened the home as a living assisted nursing home.

The place housed six residents with senile dementia. The remodeling was very well done and the building filled its beds quickly. Despite its lovely aesthetics and low patient ratio, they had great trouble retaining staff. Even the nurse manager left after only a month.

Rumors began quickly as former employees reported strange events within the house. At times they heard a wet, congested cough coming from vacant rooms. Other times they heard a baby cry. Occasional maniacal laugher could be heard throughout the house. But it was the glimpses of shadowy specters and the rare sightings of a woman in a red dress that forced most of the staff out.

A month and a half after the facility opened, one of the residents stole a carving knife from the kitchen. Staff was able to subdue the resident, but not before the ill man was able to fatally wound two other residents. Though he was demented, he claimed a woman in a red dress convinced him to do so.

The state closed the facility almost immediately thereafter. I believe the company still holds the deed, but perhaps not. Anyway, now one can hear the bloodcurdling screams echo through the house from that murderous day as well. No one is willing to buy the house because of the history. I would not buy the house. How would it be listening to

those sounds, witnessing those events daily until your time comes to join the rest of those lost souls? Waiting for the woman in the red dress to come and visit? I know I could not stand it.

As I said before, I am not one to believe in ghosts. I certainly looked at my friend when he first told me the story as you look at me with such disbelief right now. But I know these things to be true, for I sneaked into the abandoned house one night. I do not recall how long I was there. I did not see every room. I could not. The coughing, the screaming, the crying, the dusky forms that allow you to glimpse them for only a moment. The scars of that house are truly maddening.

What?... You want to see the house? Be my guest my friend, but do so without me. As I said, I have been through there once and that was enough.... Alright , alright, let me think on it over another cocktail or two....

Enough, enough already! Your persistent badgering upon the matter has become bothersome. And once again I'm afraid I will decline showing you that house.... Don't be absurd. You cannot go by yourself.... Well, I cannot let you do that.... I am not certain if it is the alcohol talking, your persistence, or my fear of one going through that house alone, probably all three, but I will accompany you.... No, I have made up my mind. We should leave after this drink.... Oh, very well then, let us go.

Notice how eerie the streetlights now appear as they streak through the fog.... Yes, I did say earlier that I love the fog, but the thoughts of what we are to encounter in that house have changed my mood. I should have brought an umbrella. This fog and drizzle is miserable. We will be lucky not to be soaked to the bone and catch pneumonia in this dank, dreary weather. See how the fog has enveloped the town like a giant death shroud. I am not sure if I shiver from its cold or its sight. I fear the house will be quite active tonight.

Come, we have several blocks to walk. When we get to the house we must climb the fence in the back alley so no one sees us enter. Then we shall have to enter though the back door.... No, it is never locked. Those on the outside, with any sense, do not want to go in. Whatever is on the inside is either trapped or refuses to come out.

When we get inside the house try to remain calm, as you perceive the scars.... Do not make light my friend. It is not an easy task. But you will learn that soon enough. It is madness going through that house, particularly on a foreboding night such as this. Oh, the dreaded anticipation as we tread through this wet blanket fog to the chilling sounds and sights.

When we enter the house we will come into the kitchen. From there we must circle into the dining room and living room to find the stairs to the second floor. It is on the second and third floors where the house is scarred the most. What?... The basement and attic?... I know

where the stairs to the basement are, but I have never gone down there. I have never been to the attic either. There are too many horrible things to see in the house. I do not believe anyone could stay in the house for any length of time, other than a short stay, without losing control of his sanity…. You shall see my friend, you shall see.

Turn here. This is the alley.

Here we are. This is a good spot to climb the fence, the hedge is thin here. Ready?... Mind your step and grips as the iron fence is cold and slick from the mist.

Are you okay?...

Yes, I am fine. Thank you.

Can you smell the wet leaves that cover the ground, rotting and churning with worms? See how foreboding the old trees stand, hunched over, reaching down with long gnarled fingers. They appear frozen while silently screaming, guarding the house, warding off those foolish enough to enter…. My heart is racing. I can hear blood course through my ears with every beat as my breath shallows and quickens.

Here is the back door. One last thing to remember when we enter, we must stay together at all times. There is strength and safety in numbers. And if you see a woman in a red dress, get out of the house as quickly as possible. Ready?... Let me get the door for you…. No, please I insist…. No, I insist….

A Sleigh Ride Through Hell

Jonathan Bidwell stood on the steps before the town hall with his hands in his pockets, smiling in the fresh morning air.

His wife, Elizabeth, stood to his right. Her arms crossed, she shifted her weight and sighed.

A make-up artist knelt on the step above Jonathan quickly fishing out assorted cosmetics from a black bag. She stood, turned to Jonathan and began wiping his face with a soft brush. Returning to her bag, she grabbed a pencil and began to work on his eyes. "You're never going to make it on time," she said squinting and wrinkling her nose. "The speech is supposed to begin in ten minutes."

Elizabeth fumbled through the purse dangling from her shoulder. She pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and then cocked her head at the artist. "Jonathan has always been irresponsible. One time he was supposed to

be the opening speaker for the *Exchange Doctors Gala*. Naturally when it was time to leave he was nowhere to be found. A friend and I began searching for him. We caught him masturbating in the cornfield."

The artist stopped with the pencil, cleared her throat and locked eyes with Elizabeth who raised her eyebrows and blew smoke through her nose. The artist returned the pencil to the bag and pulled out a black beard and a screwdriver.

"Yeah, but I made it on time. I'll be late when Hell freezes over." Jonathan chuckled. "Don't worry. I'll be on time."

The artist held the beard up to his face and began steadily screwing the handles into place. Jonathan winced as she pressed the threaded metal into his cheek bones.

When satisfied the beard adequately hid his swollen, purple cheeks and the few drops of blood that managed to escape. She stepped back. "Okay, we're done."

"Thank you," said Elizabeth. She stomped out her cigarette, grabbed Jonathan by the hand and led him down the stairs, heels clapping. They ran across the street to a wax museum. "Come on," she jerked him along. "The suit is in here."

Jonathan followed Elizabeth through the dimly lit museum, passing figures of history at every turn. Finally they stopped before a wax figure of Abraham Lincoln. The figure was incredibly life like.

Jonathan slowly stepped to the side examining it. "So, this is the suit I'm supposed to wear today, huh?" He smiled and turned to Elizabeth. "I never much cared for this style."

The figure turned to Jonathan and replied, "Well perhaps you should."

Jonathan's eyes widened. His pupils dilated. He froze. Elizabeth gasped and startled back. Abraham stood motionless again.

Several moments passed. Then Elizabeth crept forward slowly reaching out at the figure, fingers trembling. Taking short quick breaths she went to touch the figure on the arm. But the expectation of contact was never satisfied as her hand passed through the figure's arm. She shrieked jumping back. The figure remained still.

Elizabeth held her trembling hands before her face. A tear trickled from the corner of her eye. She took several deep breaths and scowled at Jonathan. His face wrinkled. He was still unable to move.

Elizabeth lunged at Jonathan, knocking him flat-backed on the floor with a thud. He tried to scramble to his feet, but she was already straddling his chest with her hands securely fastened around his throat. Jonathan gasped for air.

"You bastard!" Elizabeth screamed. "How could you let this happen to me?"

Jonathan sat up, gasping in the dark. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face. He looked at the alarm clock. 12:47 a.m. A barking dog echoed in the distance. He lay back, resting his head on the cool,

damp pillow, and wept.

Mud Hollow Bridge

In southwestern Wisconsin, nestled among the tree covered rolling hills, lies the village of Mud Hollow. This town was aptly named as it was founded in the crook of a wide bend of the Mud River, which twists its way through the countryside. Beginning at the East end of the village runs a narrow cobblestone street which was originally laid in 1859. This antiquated street meanders in a long, upward sloping semi-circle through the heart of the business section of the village. This street not only is the path to businesses of Mud Hollow, but is also the life line of the village as it connects to the opposite side of the Mud River via an old, wooden covered bridge. This road and bridge today remain the sole infrastructure connecting this village to the rest of the world. The villagers of Mud Hollow have maintained the village as closely as they could to its original construction. In fact, most of the town is registered with the State Historical Society and thereby required to maintain the village as it was

originally built, and in an effort to maintain the village as true to original the strict zoning laws of Mud Hollow prohibit the building of any other road out of town.

Despite Mud Hollow's isolation, and the fact that there never have been any major highways running by Mud Hollow, the village today finds itself thriving on tourism and art festivals. That the town continues to thrive comes as no surprise to the artists and shop owners who have resided in Mud Hollow. They understood the simple beauty of the village and the surrounding hills and forests, not to mention its quiet lack of hustle and bustle.

Originally founded by Swedish and Norwegian immigrants in the early 1800's, the town grew as lead miners burrowed into the surrounding hills and were able to load ore on barges, which eased along the Mud River to the Mississippi. Eventually the demand for the ore of this village diminished. Trains began running further west and were able to bring ore to developing cities much more quickly and efficiently. And since no train tracks were laid through Mud Hollow, the mining industry eventually died and most of the miners were forced to leave the village to find work.

There were a good number of people who refused to leave, however. They worked at area farms and markets, eking out livings as they could, secure in their little quaint, cozy village connected to the rest of the world by only the covered bridge.

As the story of Mud Hollow goes, during this time of local unemployment some of the villagers began carving statues out of wood. Before long an annual contest bloomed allowing the unemployed miners to display their other talents of Scandinavian heritage. Many of them carved creatures of folklore, trolls in particular. The winner of the contest would have his troll statue on permanent display in the village. This contest became an annual event and to this day this contest continues to be held annually on Labor Day weekend, drawing a crowd of thousands from around the country. Over the years one hundred, fifty-three winners have had their statues placed on what has become a rather statue crowded main street of Mud Hollow.

But I have learned firsthand this story goes much deeper than its superficial cover of the festival the residents would have you believe. I first went to Mud Hollow four years ago after learning about the festival in a newspaper article. And since I am not one for large crowds and wished to stroll the troll-lined streets and visit the art galleries and antique shops without the distraction of so many other visitors to this picturesque village, I arrived a week after the contest had been decided and the large crowds had left until the following year. It was a late morning in early September when I arrived at the Mud Hollow Bridge. The bridge, a narrow single-lane structure, stood as if a sentinel greeting all who were to cross the wide, deep Mud River, subtly announcing one was about to enter a place of rare beauty and antiquity.

I pulled off to the side of the road to take a couple of pictures of the old wooden bridge. Large trees, a mixture of hardwoods and softwoods, bordered the river and encroached upon the bridge along the riverbanks. A sweet aroma of wild flowers lingered in the air as the late morning sun streamed through the rich green leaves reaching from the trees that lined the Mud River. As I strode forward I could not help but notice a rather large opening in what was otherwise a solid line of trees. Curiosity of this apparent anomaly compelled me to walk forward along the road to the north corner of the bridge. From there I could see a massive stump jutting out of the ground, standing about a yard high. I was astonished by the sheer size of the massive stump and cautiously crept along the moist, spongy top of the Mud River embankment for a closer inspection. The shrill chirping of frogs scorched the swampy mud odor that permeated the air along the rivers edge. The stump was truly colossal. I estimated it to be over six feet in diameter and was certain I could lie upon it and comfortably stretch out. The stump reached out over the embankment and dropped off like a cliff wall reaching down to the cattail crowded shore. As I stood atop the stump an eerie silence befell my surroundings and a stifling anxiety crowded my chest. My breath quickened as my ears reached for any unexpected sound. I felt like a mischievous child who had been caught trespassing. I could find no sound reason for this feeling; however, I quickly descended from the stump and retreated to the bridge.

After having taken several pictures of the bridge and impressive stump I slowly drove on to the single lane of wooden planks which lined the floor of the covered bridge. The mouth of the bridge was plenty large enough for a car, but it looked like a hazardously tight squeeze for trucks delivering goods to the village. I held my breath and made a wish as I crossed; a silly superstition I learned from my grandparents many years ago. Upon creeping through the other side I found myself entering on to the main street of the village. The old cobblestone street was encroached by many well maintained shops, and of course the troll statues, which surprisingly gave the street more of a cozy than crowded feeling. I followed the street as it curved up hill to a large round-about on top where I found the Mud Hollow Hotel. Surprisingly, there was ample space for parking in front of the hotel. After having parked, I grabbed my duffle bag and took my first steps in Mud Hollow.

Perhaps it was only my anticipation of exploring this unique village, but a festive energy seemed to linger in the air as I entered the hotel lobby.

“Velkommen,” greeted a smiling, grey-haired man who stood behind the rich, dark old, hand-carved wooden counter. I told him of my reservation. In response he opened a laptop computer and checked the ledger. After typing a quick note he produced my key and proceeded to lead me up the incredibly ornate stairs to my room. Everything in the hotel seemed to be made of intricately carved wood. I had never seen so much painstaking craftsmanship like it before.

The room was warm and cozy with a decorative wooden dresser and a full size bed complete with hand carved head and footboards. After assuring him the room was very much to my liking I inquired of the best restaurant for lunch. He directed me to the tavern across the street. Eager to begin exploring the village I dropped my duffle bag on an overstuffed chair in a corner and followed the grey-haired man back down to the lobby.

From the hotel I crossed the quiet cobblestone street to the tavern. On the steps next to the entrance stood a statue of a short, fat troll with a cartoonish, smiling face. The troll held a sign reading 'The Thirsty Troll'. I grinned as I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped into the dim, artificial light of the tavern.

I found the interior of the tavern, like the interior of the hotel, to be made of intricately carved wood. There were several patrons scattered about the tables having lunch. At the far end of the bar were four men speaking in low voices with the bartender. They ceased their discussion and watched me as I pulled up a barstool at the opposite end of the bar so as to keep my distance and not to interfere with their talk. After several moments a subtle anxiety began to mount within me as they continued to quietly watch me. Finally, they returned to their low mumbling and the bartender walked over to greet me.

"Hi," he said with a smile. "What can I get for you?"

I ordered a pint of beer and asked for a menu. He brought me the beer and the menu and told me he would be back in a bit. Then he returned to mumbling group of men at the end of the bar. After a few minutes the men broke up their discussion and began to leave. The bartender made his way back to me to take my order.

"Are you ready," he asked.

"I think so," I replied, but had only narrowed my choices down to a few items. "What do you recommend?"

"The fish fry is good," he replied without hesitation.

"Great," I replied, relieved to hear him suggest a meal I was already considering. "I'll do that."

"Okay," he said with a smile and took the menu as he went to place the order.

As I sat at the bar sipping my beer, silently admiring the woodwork surrounding me while I casually debated how I would spend the rest of my afternoon, a few more locals came in and occupied random tables and booths. The bartender waited on them with casual familiarity, joking with them as he went. Eventually my food came. The fish fry was an excellent suggestion as it could very well have been the best I have ever had. I took my time, savoring each bite of the buttery, beer-battered Perch. I was about half way done with my meal when another local entered the tavern and clumsily wrestled himself on to a barstool a few seats down from me. He was unkempt with matted dark-gray hair and a ragged gray beard.

"What can I do for you, Greg?" the bartender sighed with an air of disgust.

"I'd like a beer," the man replied with the slightest of slurs.

"How 'bout some coffee?" the bartender countered as he stood before the man with his arms crossed. "Looks like you're already half in the bag."

"Come on now, Chuck. I've got money this time." The disheveled man pulled a crumpled twenty dollar bill from his pant pocket and tossed it on the bar.

The two stared at one another in silence for several moments.

"You sure you don't want coffee instead?" the bartender suggested again. They stared silently at one another for a few moments more. "Christ," the bartender muttered and shook his head. "Alright," the bartender finally conceded. "One beer and then you go. And don't cause any trouble."

"I won't cause no trouble Chuck."

The bartender brought him a pint and change. The man crumpled the bills and shoved them into his pocket, and then he fervently chugged a couple of mouthfuls from his pint. I tried to mind my own business as I continued with my meal, but the disheveled man kept looking curiously at me as he quaffed his beer. His inquisitive stare was rather unsettling and finally I had to set the last of my meal aside and looked back at him.

"Are you an investigator or reporter?" he asked in a low voice with a slight slur as his eyes shifted from side to side.

"Neither," I replied tentatively, not feeling very eager to engage this man in conversation. "I'm just here to see the sights."

With raised eyebrows he nodded. "You came at the right time, friend."

I am not certain it was what he said; most likely it was the way he said it, with open, truthful eyes trying to keep a particular knowledge silent, but a minute curiosity stirred within me. "What's that?" I encouraged him to expand upon his statement.

The bartender approached quickly with a wrinkled brow and angry eyes. "Is he bothering you?" he asked me while pointing at the disheveled man.

"No," I shrugged and shook my head slightly. I was a bit startled by the bartender's aggressiveness and was at a loss for further words.

"The trolls have taken another baby," the bearded man said loudly and quickly. There was a distinct air of desperation in his voice. He clumsily took a big gulp of beer which rushed to his mouth like an ocean wave crashing against his lips and splashed down his beard.

"That's enough, Greg!" the bartender scolded loudly as he stood before the disheveled man with his arms folded across his chest.

"Bullshit!" the unkempt man yelled and hopped off his barstool and swayed for a moment before catching his balance. He pointed across the bar. "There's footprints all over down by the bridge!" he yelled and then gulped down the rest of his beer.

"That's it, get out!" the bartender yelled and ran out from behind the bar.

"No one admits it happened on the twenty-fifth anniversary!" the bearded man yelled as he stumbled out the door before the bartender could catch him.

The bartender came to a stop next to me and watched the door for a moment. "Sorry about that," he apologized.

"That's okay," I said. "What's his deal?"

The bartender sighed and looked over his shoulder as if to make certain no one was watching him. He turned back to me and spoke in a near whisper. "Twenty-five years ago his baby daughter went missing. Who knows what the hell happened. She was probably kidnapped. There was a big investigation. I was young when it happened, but I remember helping search for her. The whole town searched. We searched for weeks, but never found her. The police tried to link him and his wife to the disappearance but they could never prove anything. It was about a year after that his wife killed herself. The innuendo around the village finally drove her to it. Small towns can be terribly cruel sometimes, ya know. He, uh…." The bartender paused for a moment as he glanced over his shoulder as if he were concerned others were paying attention before continuing in a low voice. "The poor bastard hasn't been the same since. But who would be?" He fell silent again and looked about.

"What about the trolls?" I asked in a soft and rather timid voice.

"What?" the bartender quickly shot back.

I gulped in response to his reaction. "He said the trolls took the baby."

The bartender forced out a soft laugh. "That's nothing," he said as he shook his head and glanced to his side. "He's just drank himself crazy, that's all." He fell silent again and looked around the room. Once more I distinctly felt I was trespassing as tense, quiet moments lingered. Finally the bartender asked, "Can I get you anything else?"

"I guess not," I replied. "Just the check please."

After I settled my tab I walked out into the bright, warm and humid air of the early afternoon. I took my time wandering along the main street and stopped occasionally to window shop at the quaint stores and galleries. The troll statues were placed along the side of the street about every ten feet or so, and every time I passed one I was reminded of the peculiar encounter at the tavern. But these memories were short lived as they would be purged from my mind by my fascination with some item I would find the window of a shop.

The afternoon passed as I meandered along. Finally I found myself entering an antique shop. The bells on the door jingled, announcing my arrival, but no one was there to greet me. The store was strangely quiescent. I moved about slowly and quietly as though I were moving about a library or church and I felt surprisingly self-conscious when my steps pressed out grinding squeaks and moans from the wood floor

beneath me. I browsed the isles of dinnerware, knickknacks and other random household items until I came to an isle lined with bookcases loaded full with old leather hardcover books. I stopped and let my eye slowly scan the long wall of books before me. Some of the spines were badly damaged and the titles were nearly unreadable. However, most of the books appeared to be in good repair and many of them seemed to pertain to farming and mining practices of a century ago.

Suddenly the door to the entrance of the shop swung open and from my vantage point I caught a glimpse of two young blonde women hastily entering the shop.

"You're crazy," said the second woman as she followed her shorter friend through the door.

"No I'm not. And I'm not the town drunk either," said the first.

"He's probably the one who's doing all this. He's probably a pedophile and made this up to try to throw us off his tracks," the second woman replied with disgust dripping from her words.

From their brief exchange I knew they had to be referring to Greg, the disheveled man I encountered earlier at the tavern. The memory of his wild-eyed ranting of the missing baby and trolls flashed through my mind. Intrigue further sparked my curiosity, and as the young ladies had moved out of sight, I stealthily moved from behind the bookcase to a table out in the open and pretended to be interested in the knickknacks it held as I continued to eavesdrop.

They paid no attention to me and moved to a counter at the back of the shop. The first woman rang a bell on the counter. She turned to her friend. "I know what I saw," she said nervously.

"It was probably just an animal or something," the second woman replied.

"How do explain the footprints? They're all over town, especially down by the bridge and that damn stump."

"I don't know," the second woman replied as she slowly shook her head. "If it wasn't Greg, then maybe somebody did it for last week's festival. But I certainly don't believe…."

Suddenly a white haired man with wire-rimmed glasses came through a doorway behind the counter. I recognized him as one of the men from the foursome of the tavern. "Hi Mary, Trisha, what brings you in?" he asked as he wiped his hands with a towel.

"We need to talk with Paul," said the first.

Silence ensued as the clerk assessed his pensive neighbors. Then he looked over the top of his wire-rim glasses at me and then looked back at the two ladies. "Sure," he nodded. "Why don't you come on back?" The two walked around the counter and followed him into the back room.

I stood silently at the table and cocked my ear toward the doorway and concentrated on any noise that came from the back room. Frustration began to set in my chest as a thick, heavy silence settled through the shop. At this point I had to learn more. Certainly I did not believe any trolls

existed, as Greg, the unkempt man at the bar did. Still, a missing baby, a man with a tragic history of having lost a child of his own twenty-five years ago to the day, and the villagers seemingly reluctant to discuss these matters with outsiders, left far too much intrigue for me to ignore. I stood at the table listening to silence until I finally decided to inspect the footprints down by the bridge that I heard the blonde woman mention when she and her friend entered the shop.

Thick beads of perspiration collected on my forehead and above my lip as I strode through the muggy afternoon to the bridge. White, puffy clouds hung motionless in the azure sky above the trees lining the river. I stood off to the side of the road at the corner of the bridge. The shrill chirping of frogs hiding in the tall grass and reeds along the riverbank near the bridge ceased upon my arrival but resumed after I stood motionless for a few moments. The pungent aroma of swamp mud permeated the air and filled my nostrils as I gazed over the wide, dark river at the massive stump across the way. I noticed a foot path was worn into the ground to my left and followed along the top of the riverbank through the tall grass. I walked several feet along the path to gain a better view of the stump as I vainly tried to wave away the thin swarm of gnats that had gathered before my face.

From my new vantage point I could more clearly see the massive stump across the river. The wide stump had three enormous, gnarled roots that arched from its seat on the embankment down to the river's edge where they were dug in to the muddy shore. The arches stood three to four feet tall and appeared to be the mouths of dark tunnels that stretched back into the embankment under the stump. Unlike the rest of the river's edge, which was thick with grass and cattails, the mud before the arch openings was cleared and roughly tamped down. I stood in wonder, studying the stump across the river, and finally decided to take closer inspection.

I made my way back along the path to the bridge, and cautiously stepped from the cobblestone street to the wood floor. Even with sneakers on the bridge seemed to amplify each step I took and echoed every soft tread off its dark walls. A sudden discomfort descended upon me. I was a bit light headed and I felt like a child who was encroaching on taboo knowledge. I stopped and was about to turn back when a car from the village slowly entered on to the bridge behind me. I pushed any anxiety about crossing the bridge to the side and jogged ahead to get out of the way. A moment later I found myself back out in the sun off to the side of the road. The driver waved as he passed. I stood there and watched the car drive off into the distance. By the time the car was nearly out of sight, I was determined to ignore any feeling of discomfort that had accompanied me across the bridge and I had abandoned any idea of returning to the other side of the bridge until I had inspected the massive stump just a couple of yards from me.

As I began to make my way toward the stump, I came across an overgrown, narrow path which seemed to lead down the steeply inclined side of the embankment. Thinking this would perhaps lead me down to the clear area before the arched roots, I carefully stepped forward onto the narrow, muddy path. I was about half way down the embankment when on a forward step of my left foot, my right foot slipped and I skidded down the side of the embankment and splashed into the Mud River. I stood in knee-deep water, gasping and wiping the water from my eyes. I could feel my feet starting to sink into the soft river floor. Quickly, and with a considerable amount of effort, I pulled them out. The clinging mud floor made slurping sounds with each step as I struggled and staggered toward the muddy clearing before the giant stump. I collapsed forward on to my hands and knees on the firmer mud beach. As I knelt there catching my breath I noticed the mud was covered with short, wide footprints. I studied them for a minute or so, and concluded the footsteps were unusually wide for their short length, but could have been left by a toddler. I followed footprints to where they led in and out of the tunnels that stretched back from the arching roots. I leaned forward positioning my head at the tunnel's threshold and peered back into the dark tunnel. Pungent aromas of the swampy earth were thick and heavy and laced with a putrid stench. The disgusting odor churned my stomach, so I held my breath and continued to stare back into the tunnel. There was no way for me to tell exactly how deep the tunnel ran, it was far too dark to see any detail. However, the tunnel did appear to narrow a short ways in.

I pulled my head out from the tunnel and knelt on the mud. The pungent aroma of the Mud River dripped off of me as I convinced myself the footprints must have been left by children playing around the stump. After all, the tunnels made for a wonderful retreat for mischievous boys who needed to hide out for awhile. Besides, the idea of trolls running rampant through the town stealing babies now seemed ludicrous to me, not that I really believed it in the first place. I chuckled out loud as I stood up and realized the whole troll story was probably part of some kind of publicity stunt for the previous week's festival. Certainly there may have been a missing baby, but as I climbed the embankment I was more convinced the only victim of the trolls was Greg, the village drunk.

I passed through the cool shade of the bridge leaving a trail of wet, muddy footprints in my wake. Back on the cobblestone street of the village a swarm of gnats was waiting for me. I did not even bother swatting at them. They were relentless pests that had proven I was powerless to frighten them away. So, I continued on my way back to the hotel, dripping and stinking of the marshy Mud River, with my swarming entourage flitting about my head and shoulders.

I entered the hotel lobby to find the gray-haired man still behind the desk. His eyes widened and the smile slowly slipped from his face when he saw me. "Oh, my," he began slowly. "What happened to you?"

"I fell in the river," I replied sheepishly as I shook my head.

A smile of stark amusement slowly spread across his face. "We don't call it the 'Big Stinky' for nothing," he joked as he sniffed at the air. I smiled sourly and nodded as I started up the stairs. "Once you're cleaned up, bring your dirty clothes down and we'll get 'em laundered for ya," he called after me.

"Okay," I replied over my shoulder as I continued up stairs to my room.

After bagging up my swamp-drenched clothes, I stood under the warm shower washing away the fermented mud of the river. Waves of embarrassment and foolishness I felt for having fallen into the village 'secret' and consequently the river seemed to wash away with the mud. By the time I had finished cleaning up I was able to laugh at myself for being such a chump to have fallen into both.

By the time I was dried and dressed, pangs of hunger began to rumble through my stomach. The bedside clock told me the early evening was upon us. I picked up the plastic bag containing my mud soaked clothes and took them down to the hotel lobby.

"So," the gray-haired man behind the desk said with a mischievous smile as I handed him the bag of wet, muddy clothes, "I have to ask. How exactly did you manage to fall into the water?"

After a moment of hesitation I decided not to divulge the fact that I had been drawn into investigating the stump after first overhearing Greg and then the women at the antique shop. I said with soft embarrassment, "I went for a walk down by the bridge and saw the giant stump on the other side of the river. I crossed the bridge to get a better look at it and when I was stepping down the embankment I lost my footing and fell into the river."

The mischievous smile slid from the old man's face and he assumed a serious demeanor for several moments before he forced an unconvincing smile back across his face.

"Well," he began as he set the bag of muddy clothes behind the counter, "I guess some things are better off left alone, huh."

"What do you mean?" I asked with intrigue as the innuendo had instantly rekindled itself.

The gray haired man leaned forward on the counter and glanced over his shoulders as if to make certain our conversation was not being overheard. His brow furled and deep lines stretched from the outer corners of his eyes as he squinted. The cool seriousness of his blue-gray eyes behind those wire rimmed glasses was staggering. "It is best to stay away from that stump," he said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper. "Strange things happen down there. I won't say what specifically, but it is a place best left alone."

I stood motionless, as if I were entranced by his icy stare. I felt as if I were a child being chided for my impulsive investigation of the stump. Still, something within me wanted to know more specifics of this apparent village secret. I considered questioning him further, but his steely eyes

kept any inquiries at bay. We stood silently for several moments before I was able to ask, "Where would be the best place for supper?"

The calm smile gently stretched back across his face and he straightened up behind the counter. "The Mud River Café would be the place to go. It's really a bistro rather than a café, and they usually have live jazz there."

"I think I know where you mean. Is that the place on the right when you first enter the village?"

"Yep, that'd be it."

I thanked him for the information and for taking my laundry and headed out into the warm early evening. The humid air had cooled enough that mosquitoes were now comfortable to brazenly bite at any unprotected flesh. This relentless attack hastened my steps to the bistro as I swatted at the blood thirsty pests that flitted about my face and neck. As I hurried along I was also constantly reminded of the events of the day with each troll statue I passed along the way. By the time I entered the bistro I was again convinced that there was something more to this town, some deep, dark secret they wanted no outsiders to know about.

I stepped into the cool, air conditioned bistro to find it filled with natural light from windows along the top of its high walls. A chalkboard was posted at the hostess podium with the daily specials scrawled out in bright pink and yellow chalk. I studied the specials momentarily before a young woman walked up to the podium and welcomed me. Her long blonde hair hung over her shoulders and covered over the breast of her form hugging black evening gown. I felt my heart kick in my throat as I momentarily became lost in her cool gray eyes and broad smile.

"How many?" she asked.

"Just me," I replied and suddenly felt rather self conscious of my solitude as she reached for a menu. I really did not want to be a spectacle, taking up an entire table to dine alone. "I could eat at the bar," I suggested.

"Oh, sure," she smiled and handed me the menu.

I found a seat at the bar and ordered an Old Fashioned and a chicken salad. I sipped my cocktail and looked around the restaurant. Along the wall opposite the entrance were wide door panels which had been pulled back exposing an outdoor dining area with a stage set back into a natural outdoor amphitheatre which had formed into the limestone bluff that abutted the rear of the restaurant. The stage was set for a jazz trio scheduled to start a bit later. There were only a few tables with patrons and I was alone at the bar. I sat quietly studying the carvings on the wooden bar while I sipped at my drink. Before long a steady influx of diners filled the dining area and by the time my food arrived the bar was standing room only.

Before I was finished with my meal the band took the stage and opened with "Take Five." I contemplated moving outdoors after my meal, but when I was finished I had decided my view from the bar allowed me to

see an adequate portion of the stage. So, I stayed put and ordered another cocktail and another after that. By the end of the first set it was nearly nine o'clock and I was well on my way to inebriation. However, the desire not to ruin an enjoyable trip by over imbibing encouraged me to leave when the band took their first break.

Outside the night air was warm and moist. A quarter moon ascended from the horizon into a clear sky littered with stars. The street lamps glowed along the sidewalk as I cheerily began walking back to the hotel taking my time as I went. The good spirits which had filled my chest seemed to vanish as if blown out with a single long sigh as I approached the statue of a short, squat troll under a street lamp. I stopped and studied it for a moment. His long crooked nose jutted out from his grotesque, grimacing face. His repulsive appearance in the pale, dim light forced a geyser of bitter sour up into my throat. A subtle anxiety began to stir in my chest. With a dismayed grunt I dismissed myself and started off again.

"Psssst! Over here," a whispering voice startled me.

I stopped as my head snapped to the direction of the voice. A dark form crept out from the shadows of an alley between two shops and cautiously stepped into the pale light of the street lamp. An incomplete relief washed over me as I saw Greg, the disheveled man from the tavern, stopping just short of entering the full light of the sidewalk. With quick, sloppy hand gestures he motioned for me to come over to him. I hesitated, uncertain of his intentions, until he waved me over again in a more animated manner. Again I hesitated before cautiously walking over to him. He stepped back into the shadow of the alley encouraging me to follow him. I stopped just at the edge of the dark alley refusing to leave the little comfort of pale light provided by the street lamp.

"I've kept my eye on you," he slurred and reached for his back pocket. "I saw you down at the river," I could see the yellow teeth of his foul grin glowing in the dark as he pulled a pint bottle from his pocket. After taking a quick pull from the bottle he continued in a whisper, "You've come to see the trolls?"

"I don't really believe…."

"Shhhh! Keep your voice down!" He whispered his scolding.

"I don't really believe there are any trolls," I whispered back as an avalanche of sorrow for this man cascaded through me. Sorrow for his losses, for what unfortunate events had brought upon him.

He grinned and chuckled softly. "I saw you down by the stump. I know you've seen their footprints. You want to know. You have to know."

"Look," I began uncertainly. I felt trapped. The morbid curiosity lingered within me and could not be denied. "I know about your daughter, and I'm sorry for what happened…."

"You don't know the half of it!" he spat back. He took a deep breath and another deep pull from the bottle.

Fear of his quick, angry escalation forced me to step back. "Perhaps I should be going," I suggested and turned toward the sidewalk.

With alarming speed his hand shot out and grabbed my shoulder. I turned back to him recoiling to defend myself. Keeping his hand on my shoulder, he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he began and looked intently at me. I could see the sincerity in his eyes. "Let me try this again," he chuckled sheepishly and took another gulp from the bottle. "My name is Greg. What's yours?"

"Don," I replied cautiously.

"Nice to meet you Don," Greg continued in whispers. "I know you probably think I'm crazy. I know most everyone does. But I promise you I'm telling the truth." He took another swig from his bottle and nodded. "This is the unwritten history of Mud Hollow. I learned of it from my father and grandfather," he began. "Back in the early 1800's Norwegian and Swedish immigrants settled here. This village, which started as a mining camp, soon became a happy and profitable community and thrived for several years before the railroad was laid to the south of here, and investors turned to villages, like Mineral Point, near the railroad to better increase their profits. It was about that time the villagers of Mud Hollow discovered trolls had taken up residence under the giant oak tree on the opposite side of the river by the bridge. No one was certain when the trolls arrived. Perhaps a doppelganger came with the immigrants. Or, maybe the trolls were here all along. No one really knows. But the villagers considered the trolls lair to be an evil omen and blamed their rash of unemployment on the trolls. The huge oak tree under which the trolls lived had long finger-like branches that hung down toward the ground. When the wind blew it looked like gnarled fingers trying to dig into the earth. No one liked the fact that mischievous trolls lived under such a foreboding tree.

"One day the men of the village gathered and decided to cut down the mammoth tree in an attempt to drive the trolls from their home. It took teams of men all day to cut through the massive trunk. Even though they were able to fell the giant tree, they were unable to pull the massive roots from the ground. They even hitched every available horse in the village to the stump, but even with all of the horse power the roots held their firm grip in the earth. One of the unemployed miners suggested dynamiting the stump, but the villagers decided against it because they could not take a chance of accidentally destroying the one bridge connecting them to the rest of the world. So, the villagers reluctantly gave up and hoped they had done enough to drive the trolls from their lair.

"But, as the roots remained, so did the trolls. Several days later a baby disappeared without a trace. The villagers searched for days, but never found her. The trolls made it known that during the villagers' assault on the tree an infant troll had been killed. In retribution the trolls promised to take one child from the village every twenty-five years as

payment for the villagers' crimes of cutting down the tree and killing an infant troll."

A chill shot through me as I could feel the sincerity in his voice and eyes and I knew he believed what he told me. I stood silently before him and processed the events of the day. Once again I found myself falling under the influence of innuendo and coincidences, and concluded his story warranted further investigation of the stump. And I think I believed what he told me, if not, I wanted to believe. I wanted there to be some redemption for this poor man who had suffered for so long. Still, there seemed to be no real way to prove any of what he had told me.

"Like I said," he continued in a whisper, "I've been watching you. I saw you down by their lair. You want to see them?"

I hesitated for several long moments before whispering back weakly, "Yes."

"Good," his yellow teeth glistened in the pale street light. "I need someone to help me tonight."

"Help you with what?"

Greg pulled a lump of white putty wrapped in clear plastic from his from his pocket and discretely showed it to me.

"Is that….?"

"I'm gonna do what should have been done long ago," he interrupted with bitter words.

"Jesus Christ!" I exclaimed. I could feel sudden anxiety pumping through my gut. "Are you crazy?"

"Shhh," he reminded me as a twinkle of madness sparkled in his eyes. "I'm just gonna collapse the tunnel on the inside of the stump. But I need someone to keep a look out while I'm doing it."

"This is crazy," I whispered back seriously. "Think about what you're doing."

"I've been thinking about it for the last twenty-five years," he spat back. He took a deep breath. "Look, if you can't do it for me, do it for the children. Do it for those the trolls have taken and those they'll take if we don't stop them."

That was where he got me. After several moments of silent consideration I nodded slowly. Certainly I had no desire to be any sort of hero, but I thought this might be a chance to discover the missing baby in a place that had been left undisturbed by other searchers. And, if Greg were to find the missing child and return him to his mother, it would be the redemption that Greg needed, not just for himself, but also for his wife and daughter. Based on what I had seen around town, no one would be willing to help him, so the opportunity to help was solely mine. "What do you need me to do?" I asked.

With a sneer he took another sip of from his bottle before placing it in his hip pocket. "Come with me," he said firmly as he stepped from the shadows of the alley onto the pale lamp lit sidewalk.

I followed a half step behind as his hasty gait led us weaving through shadows, exposing us to light of the street lamps only when necessary. Before long we were off to the side of the bridge along the path opposite the stump. We crouched in the tall grass. The sickle moon hung barely above the treetops as the night sky glittered off the surface of the black mud river. Fireflies sparked their yellow illuminations as the frogs and crickets chirped madly.

"Be quiet and stay still," Greg instructed me. "They won't let us see them if they know we're here." He pulled the bottle from his pocket and took a swallow. He offered me the bottle. The only thing I could think of was his yellow, crooked teeth. I shook my head in declination.

"I've been waiting a long time for the trolls. They took my baby girl twenty-five years ago. My wife couldn't stand the town talking about us, so she killed herself. Everyone talked about how I was probably the one that killed my baby girl. But I know it was the trolls." He took a big mouthful from the bottle. "I know it's the trolls that got Doreen's baby, the baby that we've been looking for…look!" He pointed across the dark river toward the stump where some overgrowth began rustling. We sat silently as we watched something move through the thick growth under the bridge.

"What is it?" I asked as I squinted at the rustling shadows, "an otter?"

Greg looked at me with wild-eyed disbelief. "Come on," he blew through gritted teeth. "Move cautiously. We'll cross the bridge for a better look."

We slowly moved up the embankment through thick dew covered grass as silently as possible to the mouth of the covered bridge. Fat beads of sweat trickled down the side of my face as we stealthily made our way into the tunnel. The thick aroma of musty, oiled wood hung in the enclosure of the bridge. Soft echoes of our footsteps resounded off the walls as we moved side-by-side in the dark toward the opposite opening dimly outlined by moonlight.

I gasped aloud as a shadowy, short, wide figure quickly waddled across the opening of the bridge toward the side where the stump stood. The figure was no animal. It ran on two legs, but stood no more than three to four feet tall.

"Come on!" Greg shouted and burst forth in pursuit. Compelled by thrilling curiosity, I followed behind him.

We reached the other side of the bridge and he pulled a small flashlight from his pocket. We moved to the top of the embankment where he paused to shine the light on some uncovered mud revealing several fresh small footprints. The tracks were exceptionally wide for such a short foot, just like the ones I saw in front of the arching roots of the stump.

I followed Greg down the embankment, taking care not to repeat my earlier folly. Greg, however, moved with swift, reckless abandon and waited for me in front of the massive root arches. He shined the light on the black, wet earth revealing short, wide foot prints. I stepped up along

his side and could feel my weight sinking ever so slightly into the spongy ground. Greg bent forward under one of the massive root arches and shined the light into the dark tunnel. For several long moments I waited pensively behind him.

"Can you hear that?" he turned back toward me while still bent over under the arch.

I strained my ears for a moment. "I can't hear anything but frogs."

"It sounds like a baby grunting," he said with wide eyes. Then he turned back toward the tunnel. "I'm going in."

Before I could protest he wriggled himself into the hole and began pulling himself forward. He stopped with his legs hanging out of the hole from about mid-shin. He was still for a moment then his legs twitched as he struggled.

"Don!" he yelled. His voice was terribly muffled and barely audible. "Don! I'm stuck! Pull me out!"

I grabbed hold of his ankles and pulled as hard as I could, but I could not budge him. I rearranged my feet in the thick mud for better leverage and re-gripped his ankles. Again I pulled as hard as I could, but to no avail. The futility of my attempts to free him forced me to call for help. I opened my cell phone only to find I had no service in the area.

"Greg!" I leaned forward and yelled to him. "I can't get you out! I have to go get help!"

"Don't go!" yelled his muffled, panic-stricken voice. "We can get it! Just try again!"

"Just try to relax!" I encouraged. "I'll be right back!"

He continued to protest as I ascended the embankment to the bridge. An overwhelming sense of urgency forced me to run through the humid night air to The Thirsty Troll as I could think of no other place to seek help.

I entered the tavern to find it about half full. Every head at the bar turned in my direction as I walked to the bartender while sucking in deep chunks of air as fat beads of sweat rolled off my face. As I crossed the room to the bartender, I noticed he was conversing with the same group of men I saw at the corner of the bar earlier that day.

"What happened?" the bartender asked as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Greg is stuck under the stump by the bridge," I gasped. "I need some help in getting him out."

"What are you talking about?" the bartender inquired further.

"Greg was planning to blow up the stump," I said as softly as I could while still trying to catch my breath. "He needed me to come and keep a look out. When we got to the stump, he said he heard a baby grunting. He crawled under it and got stuck. I can't get him out."

The men at the bar sat silently sharing knowing glances and subtle nods. After several moments of silence a plump, round faced man with graying sideburns got off his barstool. "Okay," he said seriously.

With flashlights in hand the group of men followed me to the very place where I left Greg. But when we got to the riverbank he was nowhere to be found. I stood before the empty hole below the arching roots, staring in disbelief.

"But he was here!" I insisted wildly and pointed. "He was stuck in this opening!"

"I wouldn't worry about him, mister," said a tall thin man with a van dyke and cold, serious eyes. "He probably got out on his own."

"Oh-ho, I don't think so," I insisted. "He was stuck good."

"He's probably playing a joke on you," seriously suggested the round faced man with the graying sideburns. His cold gray eyes seemed to dance in the dim moonlight. "He was always something of a joker."

After a moment of awkward silence a red headed man added, "Yeah. Yeah, he's always doin' stuff like this."

"Yeah, he had the whole town goin' on about trolls," added the white haired shopkeep.

I stood dumbfounded before them. I could tell by the look in their eyes nothing more would be done. I shook my head and grabbed a flashlight from the man nearest to me. I cautiously approached the arch and leaned forward into the hole with the light. The hole looked far too small for any normal sized man to crawl through.

"Greg?" I shouted anyway. There was no response.

I pulled out from under the arch and found his shoe on the mud among the weeds. I picked it up and left with the others. As we started back to the tavern they assured me Greg would be alright.

Back at the tavern we drank beer as they discussed the weather, soy bean and corn crops. I sat silently as they chatted and I privately mulled over the events of the night. Eventually I could not deny what I knew to be true and went back to my room. After a sleepless night I left early in the morning.

To this day I return to Mud Hollow on occasion. But even in my car I only cross the bridge in daylight. And I avoid the river where the stump is near. I am always certain to stop at "The Thirsty Troll" and inquire of Greg and the lost baby. Of the few who answer me, no one has seen either of them since they disappeared. The innuendo of the town still exists as some believe Greg was a pedophile who stole away with Doreen's baby. But I feel to the point of certainty that after twenty-five years, Greg was finally reunited with his own daughter…somewhere under the stump, next to the Mud Hollow Bridge.